Essay 4

Contextualising digital practices at home – Whose *contexts*? Whose *homes*?

Cristina Ponte[1]
FCSH, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract

This paper reviews background factors of the research questions that guide this network. From the White Paper I move on to other methodological contributions emerging from recent international literature.

Key words: Research methods; Research questions; Families; Parental Mediation;

Introduction

The I would like to start my notes for this round table focused on digital practices in homes and communities by sharing with you the words of a mother about her 4-years-old daughter's media uses after arriving from school:

> ... because she's been doing things all day at school and she's been learning and everything, I think it's her downtime, it´s what she sees as her downtime. You know when she's been hard at work at school all day, as she sees, it's her relaxing time. When she's got her uniform off and she's got changed into her normal clothes and she´ll sit back on the settee and she'll have CBeebies on she'll play on the tablet to half an hour before she has her tea. (Jade's Mum)

The quotation above was taken from the final report of the project Technology and Play, led by Jackie Marsh (2015) in the UK. This comprehensive research analyses the digital experiences and contexts of British pre-schoolers (0-5 years old) through four phases: an online survey of parents and caregivers; in-depth case studies of preschool children's use of tablet apps in six families; observations of and interviews with children using apps in a school environment; and an analysis of these apps in order to identify promotion of play and creativity. The project thus constitutes a remarkable background for the current COST Action. The demographic profile of Jade presents her as a white girl, from the social class labelled as D and without siblings (Marsh et al., 2015, p. 4). She was one of the six children from different

[1] cristina.ponte@fcsh.unl.pt

backgrounds who were visited at home.

Jade's mother describes her media use after school in contrast with the structured learning activities that the child faces at school, reporting a regulated 'downtime' scheduled by the clock. References to the school uniform or to 'having tea' activate in my mind a sense of 'Britishness' expressed by a white working class mother. In Portugal such references tend to be associated with upper class households, with resources for affording private schools where children use uniforms. Informed by this cross-cultural impression, I organised my notes with a focus on the background factors of the research questions that guide this network. From the White Paper I move on to other methodological contributions emerging from recent international literature.

DigiLItEY research questions: contextualising digital practices and literacies

The White Paper for COST Action IS1410, co-authored by Julian Sefton-Green, Jackie Marsh, Ola Erstad and Rosie Flewit, recalls the two research questions of the Action:

1) What does it mean growing up immersed in and surrounded by digital devices and forms of communication - for the everyday life, for learning, for families and for the future?

2) In what ways are the literacies of young children being transformed by wider social, technological and economic changes across Europe?

As the authors note, while the first question is oriented to social implications of growing up in digital times, surrounded by devices and forms of communication that did not exist in the childhood times of previous generations, the second question places technological changes among other changes that affect children's development of literacies. Thus, both research questions contextualise the digital environment instead of isolating it as an object of study: "digital technology does not determine social relationships: in reality it is the other way round" (p. 3).

In the following pages of the White Paper, four points provide food for thought on these social relationships: *1) Families, employment and housing; 2) Digital transformations; 3) Changing childhoods: consumption, risk and play; 4) The growth of the 'schooled society' and changing literacies.* Let us briefly review these four points.

Current *families* are living under conditions that differ from the modern family representations or the welfare policies consolidated in the 20 century in many European countries. Changes in the "family time" are related with factors such as the growth in female employment, the impact of globalisation on national economies and the work organisation, the scarcity of affordable housing for many couples, the increasing growth of large metropolitan areas or the rise of ethnic diversity in several countries.

Changes in the family time are also related to changes in the domestic space and its devices, such as the crescent number of

screens. Among the digital transformations accessible to younger children are the role of tablets as devices for watching TV programs or video clips, playing games and using apps. The White Paper notes the lack of knowledge on issues such as: non-commercial driven digital activities; the extent and range of the digital usage in these ages in terms of developing literacies; children's understanding of the world and of social relationships; the implications of these practices for children's education as a whole.

On the changing childhoods in terms of consumption, risk and play, the White Paper points to factors such as: the growing commercialisation of childhood and the child-related marketing in relation to products crossing media platforms and shops; the renovation of media panics aside with the rhetoric of the media opportunities for self-expression and creativity. As the authors note on these creative activities, "very little is known about their day-to-day occurrence, particularly for the youngest age group" (p. 10).

In relation to the growth of the 'schooled society' and the related 'pedagogicisation of everyday life' – expressions coined by Basil Bernstein and other authors in the first decade of the 21 century – the White Book shows its connection to factors such as the decline in the rates of middle-class employment, the competitive value of forms of assessment and accreditation, or the challenges faced by the public school system. Effects of these pressures on children are the 'curricularisation of leisure", an expression coined by Buckingham and Scanlon (2002), as part of a move towards a standardisation of early assessment.

Therefore, it is not a surprise that 'schooled' societies are marked by an exploration of educational products. The beliefs that out-of-school educational media are important to prepare their young children for school success have helped to fuel the explosion of these educational products, particularly among middle and upper class parents. In the United States, an analysis of Apple Store contents revealed that nearly 80% of the top-selling apps in the education category targeted children, with the "general early learning" category being the most popular subject (Shuler, 2012). However, and as pointed above, while these apps are presented as educational, there has been a lack of published research evaluating whether children do learn from these app game experiences (Wartella and Lauricella, 2014). The current COST network aims precisely to contribute to this knowledge.

Recalling these broad frames introduced in the White Paper of the current COST Action certainly makes us more attentive to the diversity of parents' social positions and expectations in relation to their children's digital uses, which are frequently expressed in contradictory views. For the purpose of our research, instead of considering 'parents' as if they constitute a homogenous group, it seems more productive to consider the diversity of contexts they experience and the dynamics of parental mediation practices. My next

notes go to recent literature that stresses these points.

Questioning the focus on WEIRD families and conditions for transcendent parenting

Celebrating its 10th birthday in January 2016, the special issue of the *Journal of Children and Media* contains a large number of articles discussing the challenges experienced by children in contemporary digital times and possible paths for future research considering their rights. I selected two articles from researchers outside Europe, which are particularly rich in methodological suggestions for overcoming ethnocentric views.

Researching children, intersectionality, and diversity in the digital age, by Meryl Alper Vikki Katz and Lynn Schofield Clark (2016), from the US, focuses on methodological challenges in order to cover the multiple contexts in which children grow up. As the authors call our attention, not only research on children and adolescents' experiences with media and technology has largely echoed the concerns of the middle-class and majority cultures. Also the focus on the so-called WEIRD families – a label for those Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic families – has been aligned with the trend to catalogue the disadvantages faced by particular social groups at the expense of considering their strengths.

Alper and colleagues underline that, in recent years, children and media scholars have increasingly challenged both the essentialist categories and the deficit frameworks pointed above, in favour of examining the social and cultural conditions by which young people are differentiated. The authors identify two orientations that have been particularly useful for this purpose: 1) explorations of the intersections between social identities through a feminist approach that affirms the relative advantages and disadvantages of different social positions; 2) taking assert– rather than deficit-based approaches – by identifying the abilities, agencies and aspirations individuals draw on in order to address life challenges and opportunities (Alper et al., 2016: 109). This is certainly a stimulating perspective for the purpose of understanding multimodal practices of young children in their use of screens and the conditions in which they achieve their multi literacies. In fact, and as pointed out in the White Paper, children's practices cannot be isolated from the diversity of their social time, space and life conditions.

Through the tablet glass: transcendent parenting in an era of mobile media and cloud computing, by Sun Sun Lim (2016), is the second article I would like to share. The author lives in Singapore, one of the urban societies most deeply penetrated by the digital, and the article makes us reflect on the current conditions of parenting. The article explores how mobile media and cloud computing shape the communication practices and media consumption habits of families, influencing how parents guide children's media use, and how parents and

children connect with one another. This growing prevalence of mobile media and cloud computing has different implications in each stage of young people's development, from the first years of life – the focus of our attention – to young adulthood. Lim argue that the advent of pervasive, ubiquitous media has engendered the practice of 'transcendent parenting' which goes beyond traditional, physical concepts of parenting, to incorporate virtual and online parenting and how these all intersect. This perspective is also in line with the attention to the impact of digital transformations on young children's life, the changing childhoods and literacies, highlighted by the White Paper.

Concluding on the need of research identifying the possible adverse effects of this new forms of parenting on families and its implications for children's development, Lim adds a set of research questions taking into account the social diversity of the families.

These questions are also in line with the refusal of a digital determinism over social relationships, expressed in the White Paper and also reported above: How do parents of different socio-economic profiles cope with the demands of transcendent parenting? Do higher SES parents have more intellectual and financial wherewithal to adopt tools and strategies that can help ease the transcendent parenting burden? Or are they conversely more oppressed by the overwhelming amount of knowledge about the normative standards they must strive to meet as "responsible parents"? Do lower SES parents feel defeated by the time and effort required to guide their children's mobile media use? (Lim, 2016: 27).

For a productive research program on these demanding questions, Lim (2016, pp. 27-28) suggests orientations that may inspire our networking: 1) innovative research protocols that can make sense of the mobile multi-screen, multi-app, multimedia and multimodal environment that surrounds family today; 2) the review of current parental mediation frameworks that were originated in a much less complex era; 3) the adoption of an approach that captures the high level of connectivity and persistent media consumption environment that families and children increasingly inhabit; 4) the combination of attention to media content and to media consumption - research should explore how contents and contexts interact, delving into the typical settings in which children consume *different kinds of media content, on which devices and in whose presence they do so*, and the online and offline interactions surrounding such media use.

I would like to conclude these brief notes by calling your attention to another recent article, *A qualitative inquiry into the contextualised parental mediation practices of young children's digital use at home*, by Bieke Zaman, Marije Nouwen, Jeroen Vanattenhoven, Evelien de Ferrerre and Jan Van Looy (2016), from Flanders, Belgium. The study was designed in a qualitative and mixed-method approach involving an active interaction with 24 parents of 3-9-years-old children, from different social backgrounds.

The analysis provides rich evidence of dynamics of parental mediation often marked by contradictions and movements from one type of mediation to another: restrictive, active and distant mediation, co-use, and participatory learning.

Restrictive and active mediation, the most identified kinds of mediation by parents themselves, are analysed by taking into account parents' decisions on time, devices, contents, location and purchase. Distant mediation covers those parental attitudes expressing deference and trust in the child's choices, and of supervision, when parents allow children to use digital media with a certain autonomy but under direct supervision. The authors link this kind of mediation to parents' multitasking housekeeping activities in line with the White Paper's call for attention to the contemporary contexts of family, employment and housing. Co-use mediation distinguishes two parental attitudes and practices: the helper and the buddy, the latter sharing media activities for family pleasure and recreational purposes.

Participatory learning, a form of interactive mediation between parents and children favoured by the digital environment (Clark, 2011), was here visible in parents' words and observed parent-child practices in ways that illustrated the pressure of the 'schooled society' reported above. This mediation identified by Zaman and colleagues combined characteristics of co-use and active mediation and was manifested among parents who wanted to invest in their children and/or their own knowledge and skills; the expression of this mediation emerged in parents' words directed to operational learning; the latter was seen as an investment in acquiring digital literacy skills for both the child and the parent.

As the authors conclude, the study revealed the dynamic and often paradoxical nature of parental mediation, not only providing examples of emergent practices of parental mediation but also making visible the need of a holistic approach and the importance of accounting for contextual and social practices as part of a research program.

Similar ideas have also been expressed in other recent forums, namely the platform "Parenting for Digital Future", led by Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross. Here one can found accessible research notes by academics and activists around the world, several of them focused on questions related to our age group. Among the many references, I would like to underline the post by Livingstone and Blum-Ross, questioning and discussing the generic advices to parents on screen time[2].

These brief notes moved from my impressions of 'Britishness' in the words of a working class mother crossed with my own national context to a brief review of recent papers on environments and methodologies. I hope that their evaluation of diversity and intersectionality of factors

[2] See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2016/07/06/what-and-how-should-parents-be-advised-about-screen-time/ (accessed on 24.08.2016).

may be useful for research on the younger digital users with which we are involved as a network.

References

Alper, M., Katz, V., & Clark, L.S. (2016). Researching children, intersectionality, and diversity in the digital age. *Journal of Children and Media* 10(1), 107-114.

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Buckingham, D. & Scanlon, M. (2002). *Education, Entertainment and Learning in the Home*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Clark, L. S. (2011). Parental Mediation Theory for the Digital Age. *Communication Theory* 21, 323-343.

Lim, S. S. (2016). Through the tablet glass: transcendent parenting in an era of mobile media and cloud computing. J*ournal of Children and Media* 10(1), 21-29.

Marsh, J., Plowman, L., Yamada-Rice, D., Bishop, J.C., Lahmar, J., Scott, F., Davenport, A., Davis, S., French, K., Piras, M., Thornhill, S., Robinson, P. and Winter, P. (2015). *Exploring Play and Creativity in Pre-Schoolers' Use of Apps: Final Project Report.* Accessed at: www.techandplay.org.

Sefton-Green, J., Marsh, J., Erstad, O., & Flewitt, R. (2015). *Establishing a Research Agenda for the Digital Literacy Practices of Young Children. A White Paper for COST Action IS1410,* http://digitiley.eu.

Schuler, C. (2012). *iLearnII: An analysis of the education category of the iTunes AppStore.* New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.

Wartella, E. & Lauricella, A. (2014). Early Learning, Academic Achievement and Children's Digital Media Use. In A. Jordan & D. Romer (Eds). *Media and the well-being of children and adolescents* (pp. 173-186). Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Zaman, B., Nouwen, M., Vanattenhoven, J., de Ferrerre, E. & Van Looy, J. (2016). A qualitative inquiry into the contextualized parental mediation practices of young children's digital media use at home. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 60(1), 1-22.